

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM AND QUEST FOR GOD IN LEO TOLSTOY'S

THE COFFEE HOUSE OF SURAT

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ABSTRACT

It has been normally perceived that there is a creator for all living beings and it is evident that the superior power of divinity should not be ignored. Man has been believing in God that he would rescue him out of these calamities of earth, but, Charles Darwin and his ideologies about evolution has put man in a state of despondency and desperation to go in quest for God and find him as soon as possible before his demise. The causalities found by man in the Second World War has inculcated in his mind a long lasting question whether there is someone to save him. Religion has been trying all along to answer this question in its own regard and fashion. This has evoked Religious Exclusivism that their God is the true God which may not be accepted by the other person. Leo Tolstoy tried to somehow find the answer about God in order to evade the existentialism found in one's life and employ meaning in it. Leo Tolstoy's ideologies are unique as he does not want to speak about the ecstasy which can be found in Heaven or afterlife but in the earth itself.

KEYWORDS: *Believing in God, Ideologies about Evolution*

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INTRODUCTION

The Coffee House of Surat

Leo Tolstoy has wonderfully managed to inculcate the idea of God through his writings like that of *A Confession* and *Resurrection*. This particular story speaks about the various opinions staged by various individuals of various ethnicity and the ultimate answer through a story when asked about God. Tolstoy unifies God with faith of ones own and the evident need to tell truth. Tolstoy has also managed to choose the ambience of a Coffee House for this story carefully as it is an ideal place for a debate and a final answer.

“One day a learned Persian theologian visited this coffee house. He was a man who has spent his life studying the nature of the Deity, and reading and writing books upon the subject. He has thought, read, and written so much about God, that eventually he lost his wits became quite confused, and ceased even to believe in the existence of God.” (TKSAOS-198)

The Inception of the Debate

The initial visitor to the coffee house was a theologian. Evidently it naturally means he is learned and scholarly and tends to find lot of answers which life has asked him. Out of those questions is the vital one of the existence of God. Out of his education he has somehow checked himself in believing in the existence of God which has exiled him from his country. Instead of understanding the idea of reasoning the theologian has sufficed himself that there is no reasoning or control over God or nature or universe. This theologian had an African slave

who was the host to start the conversation lading to the existence of God.

“‘Tell me, wretched slave’ said he, do you think there is God, or not? ‘Of course there is,’ said the slave, and immediately drew from under his girdle a small idol of wood. ‘There,’ said he, everyone in our country worships the fetish tree, from the wood of which this God was made.’”(TKSAOS-198)

The Theologian asks his slave about the existence of God for which the answer of the slave is positive. The slave shows the theologian a piece of wood and says that it is God. This conversation was heard by various people and religious exclusivism started its pace.

The Religious Exclusivism of a Hindu, Muslim and a Christian

The first one to start the debate was a Brahmin of India. His answer to God is that the only God is Brahma. He wanted to convince everyone that Brahma is the true God. “Miserable fool! Is it possible you believe that God can be carried under a man's girdle? There is one God-Brahma, and he is greater than this whole world, for he created it.” (TKSAOS-199)

This was not a convincing argument for the Jew who was also an attendee. He argued that the true abode of God is not India but Israel. He argued that the true God is not the God of Brahmins but that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He argued that one day Israel will be the ruler of the whole world. “The true God is not the God of Brahmins, but of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With the temple of Jerusalem-the wonder of ancient world-restored to its splendour, shall Israel be established a ruler over all nations.”(TKSAOS-199,200)

A Roman Catholic argued that the statement of the Jew is negative as he argued in Italian that God is present in Rome and he said that God does not have preference or prejudice for a nation rather he expects everyone to shelter under the wings of Catholic church where salvation is found. “God shows preference to no nation, but calls all who wish to be saved to the bosom of the Catholic Church of Rome, the one outside whose borders no salvation can be found.”(TKSAOS-200)

“‘How can you say that salvation belongs to your religion? Those only will be saved, who serve God according to the Gospel, in spirit and in truth, as bidden by the word of Christ.’” (TKSAOS-200). Naturally the Catholic was opposed by a Protestant. His argument was that the salvation said by the Catholic was not the aspect assigned for Catholics but the true salvation can be found by Christ. We can see the exclusivism of Christianity and even evidently see the differences of opinion in one religion. This again strengthens the ambiguity of the God and his true existence.

“‘Your belief in your Roman religion is vain,’ said he. ‘It was superseded twelve hundred years ago by the true faith: that of Mohammed! You cannot but observe how the true Mohammedan faith continues to spread both in Europe and Asia, and even in the enlightened country of China. You say yourselves that God has rejected the Jews: and as a proof, you quote the fact that the Jews are humiliated and their faith does not spread.’” (TKSAOS-200)

The second largest religion Islam does not spare its absence in the debate, as a Muslim strongly objects the presence of other religions except Islam. He is confident and comfortable that his religion of Islam has spread its roots in various parts of the world including highly populated Europe, Asia and China. He argues that his religion is a vintage one and has preceeded another major religion of the world, Christianity. He even brings up the anti-Semitism experienced by

Jews especially in the hands of Christians.

The Chinaman's explanation

This debate of God has reached its heights as everyone in the coffeehouse turned to argue about their points on their religion. There were lot of them like Abyssinian Christians, Llamas from Tibet, Ismailians and Fire- Worshippers. There was a massive Religious Exclusivism as everyone tried to make their point. Everyone was shouting in this commotion except a Chinaman who was silent. "You can confirm what I say, my good Chinaman. You hold your peace, but if you spoke I know you would uphold my opinion." (TKSAOS-201). The Muslim was asking the opinion of the Chinaman and naturally he wants the Chinaman to be on his side. It is the pride which prevents man to agree. "So he argued, and, as a result of always looking at sun and always thinking about it, he lost both his sight and his reason. And when he went blind, he became fully convinced that the sun did not exist." (TKSAOS-202). The Chinaman tried to explain God. His explanation is through a story where a man who was gazing the bright Sun eventually became quite blind because of the massive light of the Sun. This blind man eventually comes to a conclusion that the sun does not exist.

CONCLUSIONS

" 'I do not know what the sun is' said the slave 'That is no business of mine. But I know what light is. Here I have made a night-light, by the help of which I can serve you and find anything I want in the hut' ". (TKSAOS-202) The story does not conclude as the Chinaman continued. He convinced everyone that the blind man was enlightened by a slave. The slave who was with the blind man argued that, he does not want to see the sun but he wants only the light with which he can help himself and find some purpose.

" "So on matters of faith, continued the Chinaman the student of Confucius, 'it is pride that causes error and discord among men. As with the sun, so it is with God. Each man wants to have a special God of his own, or at least a special God for his native land. Each nation wishes to confine in its own temples Him, whom the world cannot contain.' "

The Chinaman indeed speaks about faith which is invisible like that of God, is the root cause of all reasoning. This sense of Religious Exclusivism arises from the pride of each and everyone which should not be nurtured. It's the faith which turns things to the side of hope and answers and gives us purpose to enjoy the world.

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